THE PART ABOUT ROSES

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—This poem is about the aftermath of being diagnosed with cystic fibrosis just before my 33rd birthday.

You get used to things
breaking down:
computers, internal organs.
Some days are just
one big blue screen.

Gather up papers
and medical bills inches deep
for your tax returns.
Give thanks for the rare things
that come with refunds.

Some things in life
are not so easy.

Children pronounce the name
of my disease like
pretty flowers.
I get so many thorns.

Late nights spent waiting,
memories prick me.
Dive into a black screen
starting over from scratch
like I wish I could do
with this pile of damaged goods.

I remember my father
telling me how to become
a famous scientist.
The secret, he said,
is to prove something
everyone already knows.

Now I hand out Nobel prizes
left and right for seeing
the obvious.
I have records and specimen jars
and shit like roofing tar.

You get used to my stories,
ugly details bound with humor
so that I may not weep.
And then so many questions.
Will you die?
Well, yes.
But probably not soon.

I say it is a blessing.
I say I am lucky.
I am literally and figuratively
full of shit.

After my diagnosis
people got busy
putting 65 roses
on a grave that I
forgot to dig.

Say the part about roses
out loud—aha.
I grow so tired of
explaining things.

I was not meant for living,
but missed that memo
and tick on through tax years
and death sentences
and CT scans
and ultrasounds
and needle sticks
and spirometry
and piss tests
and hopes that swell
and wishes that burn.

Red pills sit like
Sophocles villains
in earplug boxes.
I swallow them in droves,
rattling.
Digestion hangs around
in a coat pocket.

I float on salty water,
oceans I cannot clear.
I suffer tidal waves,
give each a name:
Too Little and Too Late.

I pay my taxes and
Uncle Sam pays back.
I have never met
this uncle, but I wonder
if he wants me to live.
Sometimes it is awfully
hard to tell.

I talk on the telephone.
Swim in tears that singe
my fissured skin.
I wade into cynicism like
lapping waves, remember:
all life is death and taxes.

Death is a slow drowning
in cement overcoats
of your own making.
And life is a steep
price to pay for 32 waves
of incomplete data.

I boot the computer
so I can file
my taxes,
itemize my losses.
Another year of life
in the books.

Fame carries the old
hollow promises of youth.
Good news wears shoes
forged in concrete,
the same despair
my parents carried
those years they knew—but
could not prove—what was killing me.

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